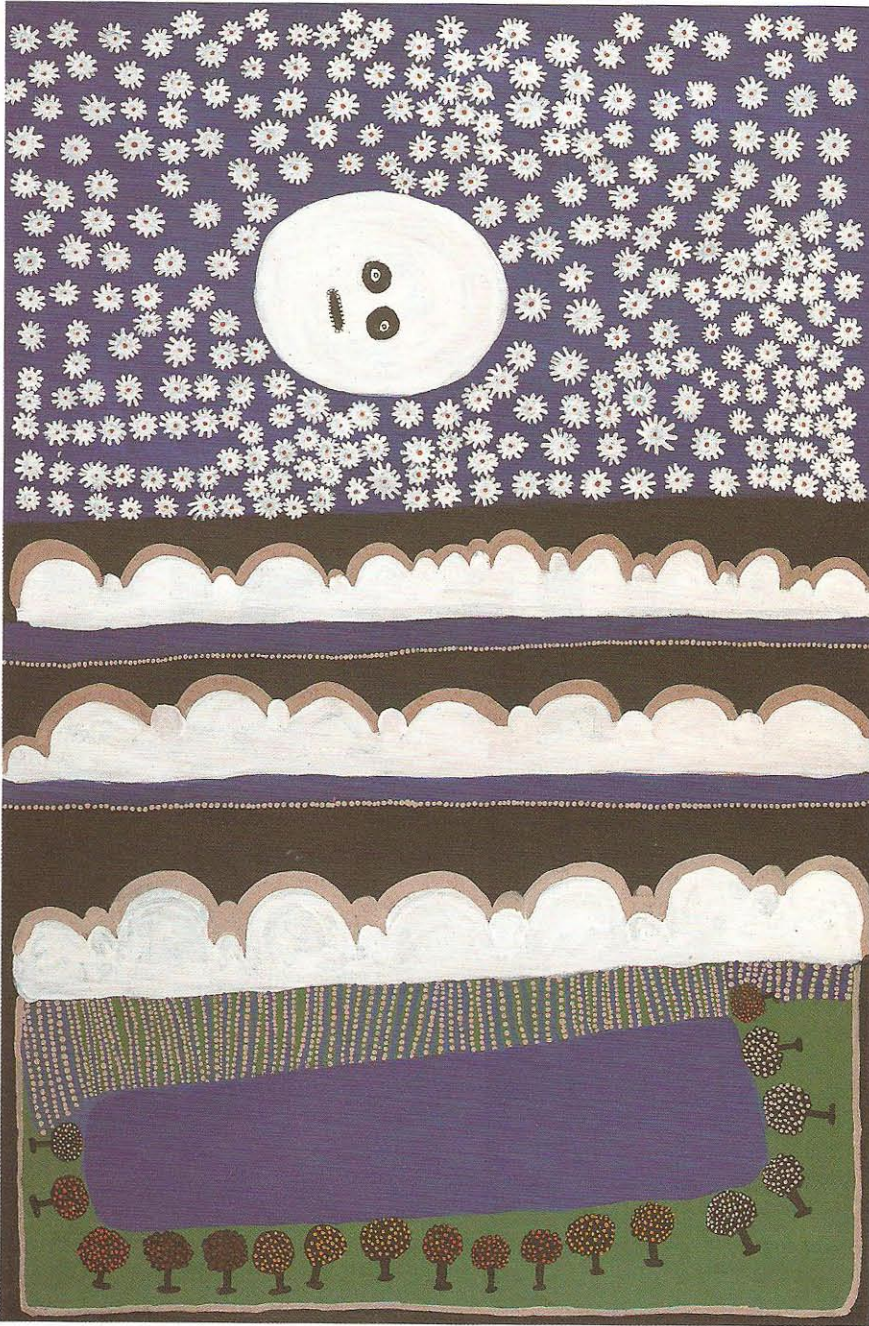


# Holy Holy Holy

at the Flinders University City Gallery in Adelaide

NICK WATERLOW



Jarinyanu David Downs (Wangkajunga/Walmajarri), *Genesis – God, star, rain and heaven*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint and earth pigments on Belgium linen. Collection of Duncan Kentish. Photo Clayton Glen. © artist's estate.

The last three Adelaide Festivals have witnessed stimulating exhibitions at the Flinders University City Gallery. In 2000 *From appreciation to appropriation: Indigenous influences and images in Australian art* posed a number of important questions in

relation to authorship and authenticity; in 2002 *River, land and memory: The work of Ian Abdulla* fully revealed one of this country's most magical artists. And now in 2004, *Holy Holy Holy* examines relationships between Christian teaching, its translation and

Aboriginal culture, through the work of contemporary artists and a number of precursors, with additional material objects such as photographs, books and documents that shed historical light on the subject.

*Holy Holy Holy* is accompanied by an excellent catalogue, with particularly enlightening essays by Marcia Langton and Varga Hosseini, and a deeply researched and clearly articulated rationale by the curator Vivonne Thwaites. What this exhibition does prove is how effectively Aboriginal culture, in particular through art, has been able, despite appalling obstacles and a continually stalled reconciliation process, to assert not its supremacy for that, unlike the Christian missionaries, was never its premise, but its primal position for Aboriginal people, and its importance for the rest of the world.

The earliest missions were established in the first half of the nineteenth century, with little success, hardly surprising when accompanied by 'the current theories of race which placed Australian Aborigines at the lowest end of the scale of human development. It was widely assumed that they would soon leave the stage of world history as a vestige of an earlier stage of development'.<sup>1</sup> Marcia Langton explained how European expansion included bringing the 'word of God' to the pagans and heathens, with attitude: 'The loathing for Aboriginal cultural practices followed this fundamental Christian stance towards the first peoples of the continent'.<sup>2</sup> Varga Hosseini took the point further, emphasising how Christianity 'is distinguished by its effortless ability to enter living cultures and – through translation – *render itself compatible with 'all cultures'*'; unlike Islam, for example, that demands a following of the non-translatable Koran.

But the missionaries of successive generations had not bargained on the survival, let alone the quotidian resilience of the Aboriginal spiritual world. A useful explanation is given by Professor Stanner whom I paraphrase: 'only a blindness of the mind's eye prevented Europeans in the past from understanding that Aboriginal ritual in all its creative forms had a sacramental quality, providing most vivid realisations of a belief in spiritual power laying hold of material things and ennobling them under a timeless purpose in which men feel they have a place'.<sup>4</sup> When Christian push came to shove, and one belief system confronted another, it gradually became quite clear how Aboriginal culture and art represented an understanding



